Au Revoir, Chez Francois: One Less

By William Rice

Sometime soon, when spring lures office-dwellers outside for luncheon or a late afternoon drink, a number of pepole are going to realize Washington has been deprived of an institution. There will be no more terrace at Chez Francois. There will, in fact, be no more Chez Francois after Arpil 12.

In the name of progress, an erratic and sometimes dubious justification for change, it has been determined that downtown is to have one more office building and one less restaurant.

The hotel and townhouses near Farragut Square to be replaced by the new building have been ruled expendable despite the upcoming Bicentennial.

The restaurant? In a city where French restaurants seem to sprout in bunches instead of being nurtured individually, it should be easy to replace. But economics and human nature indicate otherwise. Chez Francois, as unpretentious and single-minded as its owner, is not likely to be duplicated.

Francois Haeringer, the intense Alsacian who built the eating place that bears his name, summed up the squeeze faced by a restaurateur going into a new building here after he announced his closing several weeks ago. "We have had one main asset," he said, "a good meal that isn't too expensive. If I move into a new building downtown, I can't keep that. The rent per square foot they ask is ridiculous. To pay that rent I couldn't keep my prices. I couldn't have the same style place. I want to continue to treat my customers in the same way. I couldn't do that anymore downtown."

Thus Haeringer plans to leave town and open a country-style restaurant in Great Falls, Va., near Reston.

Whatever comes after him, if there is a restaurant in the new building, will be less ambitious, more expensive or both and the fragrant odors of Washington's best *choucroute garni* of *quiche* or plum tart will continue to waft toward Connecticut Avenue only in the memories of passersby.

To keep the record straight, Chez Francois has never been the only French restaurant in Washington, nor, in many minds, has it been the best. Serving 500 meals a day or more from an extensive menu, Haeringer, or anyone else, had to come up with some mediocre meals and mundane dishes. But the cause was human failing, not cynical disinterest in quality or blind pursuit of profit.

Haeringer has admitted that the restaurant he took over in 1954 got out of hand. It had been called the Three Musketeers. Francois, a chef who came to the United States in 1948, redecorated the place in the style of an Alsace village. It was pretty, tidy and welcoming, seating 75 snugly. Situated on the short block of Connecticut between Farragut Square and Lafayette Park, it became a rendezvous for government officials and diplomats.

In 1959 Chez Francois expanded by absorbing the King Cole Room next door. More stylish (and more expensive) French restaurants lured away celebrities during the '60s, but Haeringer appeared to take no notice. He is a shy man who prefers working in his kitchen to mingling in the dining room. Therefore, for some years the public mistakenly thought "Francois" was an elderly man with upturned mustaches who wandered through the dining room each day greeting customers. It was instead a family friend, a retired chef named Claude "Papa" Jarret.

By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

Francois Haeringer, right, wife, Marie Antoinette, son Jacques at Chez Francois.

Steady customers, "a good, middle-class group," tourists and young people kept business brisk. They found a varied menu of full meals that included several fine recipes from Alsace, three or four specials that

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changed daily and one of the city's most extensive and reasonably priced wine lists. Serving was by waitresses in native costume and hostesses patrolled dining areas decorated with Alsacian craftwork. Fish swam in tanks below pots of flowers. It was all done on a human scale, tinged with warmth and people responded to that.

In 1968, Haeringer built a second-floor addition that raised his seating total to over 225. It was styled an "auberge," a country inn, and its handcrafted design and imported tiles represented the concept he hopes to realize more fully in Great Falls.

The bar space was useful. Chez Francois takes no reservations for luncheon and is often backed up in the evenings. But his staff expanded as well, to more than 90. A traditionalist who began work in the trade at 14, Haeringer has little sympathy with the current work ethic. Time and again in conversation he returns to the subject. "Someone has to do the little things," he said to an interviewer several years ago. "We must find a way to make people proud to work in a trade. Not everyone can go to university and earn a big salary."

The personal example he set didn't rub off altogether, and while customers kept coming even when prices were forced upward the frustrations seemed to grow apace.

About two years ago his desire to find an alternative, plus a feeling that the Claridge Hotel, in which Chez Francois is housed, was doomed, led him to buy a commercial property on Springvale Road, a rural setting in Great Falls on the Virginia side of the Potomac near River Bend.

The new restaurant, he insists, will be rustic, small and spacious, seating only 75 to 100. It may be open only for dinner during the week and will have a staff handpicked from his present crew. A second Haeringer is expected to be on duty in the kitchen. Jacques, Francois' eldest son at 24, trained at restaurants and bakeries in France after obtaining a degree from the University of Richmond. Fresh fish dishes and omelets should be among the featured dishes.

As a member of the "old guard" of Washington restaurateurs and their Epicurian Club, Haeringer tried to build a bridge to the new generation of French chefs whose restaurants have opened in the past 10 years.

He failed. The chefs preferred to stick with their own organization, the Amicale Culinaire. The 56-year-old Haeringer, who holds the French government's agricultural medal of merit, is carefully invited to their functions but represents another generation to many.

Now that his initial plan to operate both a country and city restaurant for a time is gone, Haeringer will push ahead in hopes of opening his auberge in the fall. He is already fretting about stocking proper wines, about holding help until he can open and the details of construction. "I'll have something no one else has again," he commented last week.

The final two weeks of Chez Francois will be something of a running farewell party. The move thereafter isn't far. The site of the new restauratnt is off Route 7, about 10 minutes beyond the Beltway.

But to those who glance into the hole in the ground near Farragut Square on their way to lunch next fall, it may seem a very long way indeed.